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quarters

published quarterly by the faculty of la salle college

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November, 1967
vol. XVII, no. 1 • fifty cents

Can You Blame Her, If She's Blind?

• Rose Philbrook

One of Mrs. Bosorov's discontents was her living-room furniture upholstery. She had bought the suite while living in England, in 1932, during the tenth year of her marriage. Discovering it in that land of soot and fog, which she despised—all but the royal family and its periphery of aristocrats—was like discovering a circlet of jewels in a heap of coal. The five pieces of rosewood, authentic Victorian, intensified her nostalgia for the genteel environment in which she had been reared and from which the Bolshevik revolution had forced her family to flee. She had been sixteen at the time, eager for the only life comprehensible to her, that of a heroine in a Russian operetta. She had been swindled of it, and from the hour she married Mr. Bosorov she never ceased expecting him to make reparation.

When she told Mr. Bosorov that the suite must be reupholstered, she had long since reversed her opinion of him from that of the enterprising gentleman she had married to a man ignorant of culture, romance, and beauty. He did not surprise her. Business is terrible, he said; there is no money for such things. Furthermore, if the stuff is a little faded, that merely proved it to be an antique. And, anyhow, since they were soon moving to America, they must sell the household and buy new in the

new country. Mrs. Bosorov said she would sooner part with him than her Victorian suite.

So it was shipped to America along with its adornments. Among these were a sepia print of the child Haydn, caught by the lighted candle in his nightgowned mother's hand, playing the organ in his nightshirt. There was no piano in the Bosorov living room, for Mrs. Bosorov was convinced that not one of her five children would crawl from a warm bed in the middle of the night to practice. For once, Mr. Bosorov agreed.

On everything else, they were by now disagreeing so violently that one day, in the seventh year of life in the States, he led his brood to a photographer. The day after the finished photo arrived, he disappeared with it.

Nina was then fourteen. It was midwinter, dark at six forty-five, when her Father should have been home. She and her year younger sister, Paula, had set the old dining-room table in the large kitchen of the flat. Alex and Eugene, fifteen and sixteen, were still out with their paper routes. Sidney, who was nine, tinkered with an old nickel clock he had taken apart. Every now and then he let the bell explode like a fire alarm, his frail body poised to escape his mother's hand. She was

in one of her inflammable moods. Each time she went to the living-room window and saw some *other* husband return from work, she strode back to the kitchen in a crackle of sparks.

"All right," she said angrily. "Sit down, all of you. Who can wait for him?" She carved the pot roast, of which Mr. Bosorov was especially fond. (Nina had noticed that the night following a fight, she prepared one of his favorite dishes.) "His wages are so grand he must fiddle around late like he owns the place? It's no job for him anyhow. He couldn't have opened a tobacco shop like in England? A cutter he had to be. Of dresses yet. With *his* taste! Ha!" She neither expected nor received any rebuttal.

The two older boys tramped in, winter fire on their cheeks. "Where's Pop?" asked Eugene.

"Why ask me?" She slapped down food before them. "Does he tell me his business? Do I know his secrets?"

"So he's late for once," said Alex. "It's snowing like the devil. Regular blizzard. The train could be stuck, or an accident."

"An accident I'd have heard about. Bad news travels." With a long-suffering exclamation of "Children!" she looked at them around the table as if they were not the issues but the wages of love, obstructions in her war with her husband.

Nina was ever amazed at her childishness. Her mother, she was certain, expected that one morning, her father would leap out of bed, materialized from her fancy, ready to carry her about on his arms, and bring glasses of wine to her in her bath. And until that improbable day, she tore into rages of frustration which inevitably ended with her collapse

on the bed, a dampened towel enclosing a sliced dill pickle to keep it cool, plastered to her head, and the children whispering and tiptoeing about for fear of reviving her.

The children had grown deaf to her tirades. They knew this one, like all the others, would last the evening. Paula ate, with a book propped before her. Sidney, his eyes alive with interest, listened to his brothers discuss the New York World's Fair of that year, and how much it would cost to get them there from Boston, where they lived.

And Nina worried about her father. She visioned him lying in some dark alley, his pockets turned out, his gold watch stolen, choked to death by his woolen scarf, his body growing whiter and whiter under the falling snow. The picture dropped a block of ice behind her breastbone.

Her father: a dark, brooding man, silent for hours before her mother's taunts, until suddenly his fist struck the table in a detonation that sent crockery smashing to the floor. And yet, years ago, he had stood beside her bed in the dark, gently asking, "Do you love me as much as you love Mother?" She had not answered, caught up in wondering how much she did love her mother, if at all.

While the girls washed the dishes, the boys attacked their homework. Mrs. Bosorov filled a plate and sat down, her face momentarily smoothed in the appeasement of appetite. Finished, she glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty. The children looked at her. "Did you phone the shop?" asked Eugene.

"Am I an idiot? Only the watchman answered."

"He'll come, he'll come," said Paula. "He always does, doesn't he?"

Ten o'clock. The children were in

bed. Nina heard her mother puttering in the kitchen, felt the steam of her smoldering wrath drift through the flat.

"The minute he comes," whispered Paula, "Wham!"

"But did you notice how she looked?" whispered Nina. "Worried. Maybe she loves him after all."

This possibility stunned them into silence. Then Paula said, "Ah, she looked like that when her cat ran away."

Nina closed her eyes, shut out the finger of light slanting in from the kitchen. Into her mind appeared the Christmas card house, snugly furnished, shinningly clean, surrounded by fragrant trees, the only sound the wind through their leaves and from the nests in their boughs, the singing of birds. Again she played the game: "Who shall I invite to live with me? Paula? Papa? The boys? All." A smile on her lips, she fell asleep.

She awoke to the sound of her mother on the telephone. Together with Paula, she gathered up her clothes and dashed to the warm kitchen. Sidney was dressing before the open oven of the stove. The older boys had left. The girls dressed quietly, listening to their mother in the dining room. At last she hung up and walked in, a figure of doom.

"I talked to the bookkeeper. Two weeks ago he gave his notice. Resigned. No one knows where he is." Her expression was one which Nina of late had begun to notice; it held a lurking defeat, as if the wall she kept ramming might never, after all, give way. "Without a penny he left us. Without food."

Paula stared at her mother, her face white. Sidney demanded to be told what "resigned" meant. Nina diverted him by pouring his cocoa,

splashing as much in the saucer. And then, astounded, she detected a note of relish in the words "Charity, poor-house, disgrace" dripping from her mother's tongue, and she noticed the way her mother's eyes darted from one child to the other, like a theatre director considering his props. She could not know that her mother had already flung herself into the role of the beautiful, innocent wife, deserted with her little ones by a *villain*—a wife with no fault save one, which she was always ready to admit—"I am too good."

That afternoon, Nina returned from school, dumbfounded to find her mother at a tea and cake-laden table, surrounded by the family albums and several nosy-faced neighbors. Mrs. Bosorov's pitiable expression included Nina, as she indicated her as one of the abandoned. Nina shrank from the neighbors' offerings of the cakes they themselves had brought, though Mrs. Bosorov, in her compulsion to justify her position, would have welcomed them without entrance fee.

Sick with shame, Nina watched her mother. Didn't she remember that she was not on speaking terms with any of these women? That she had disdained them as "peasants" with no better taste than to stuff their living rooms with vulgar three-piece mohair suites?

The neighbors had once been impressed by her mother's milk-white complexion, her tall, regal figure, her elegance. She had come from a Russia of balls, gymnasias, from the cosmopolitan city of Kiev, and they from wretched villages and pogroms, a difference she had never let them forget—even now, appealing for their sympathy. Behind the commiseration

in their dark eyes, Nina caught glints of malice.

"See—" Mrs. Bosorov gazed at a picture of herself with a tenderness never granted her children, "—here I am under a cherry tree reading a book. In the summer we always kept a samovar in the garden, on cloths embroidered by the servants. See—" She passed around another picture. "—here I am pouring tea for my brothers and their student friends."

Suddenly, this tea-and-cake scene was broken into by a special delivery letter. Nina glanced at the handwriting. "From Papa!" she cried, and the proud look she cast the neighbors vindicated her father. Mrs. Bosorov tore open the envelope. A check fell into her hands. She stared at it with mingled relief and chagrin. She had not a word to say. And looking as though the final curtain had fallen on the villain holding trumps, the neighbors prepared to leave, one of them casually repossessing an apple strudel she had brought.

The moment the door closed, Mrs. Bosorov turned to the letter. A similar check, Mr. Bosorov wrote, could be expected every two weeks. He further explained that his relatives in New Jersey (whom the children had never met, for their mother had never "lowered herself" to acknowledge such common people as inlaws) had staked him to enough to start a small dress factory in Chicago, a city, he added, to which Boston, in comparison, was a village.

"He was clever enough to mail it before I sent the police on his trail." Mrs. Bosorov took another look at the check. "Mark my words," she said darkly, "it'll be the last bit of money we'll see from him."

Though Nina was well acquainted

with her mother's distortions, she felt this prophesy root itself in her heart.

When Paula said, "At least there'll be no more fights," she had underestimated her mother's constitutional need for battle. With her main adversary thousands of miles removed, her frustrations, compounded, victimized the children. Not only Nina, but all the children longed for the one day in the week, the Sabbath, when the flat resembled a home.

Mrs. Bosorov observed the rituals of her faith. All day Friday she scrubbed and cleaned, she polished into dark mirrors the five-piece Victorian suite. If Nina happened to be home, she would call her into the room and, admiring the satiny finish, sigh, "Wouldn't it look beautiful upholstered in gold?" Nina never dared to express the wish that the suite be exchanged for three pieces of comfortable mohair, as in the homes of her peers.

Friday evenings always found Mrs. Bosorov exhausted by toil, sweetened by the virtuous feeling of accomplishment. She smiled happily when the children praised her chicken soup, her noodle pudding, nor did she out-shout the radio when Alex, who loved classical music, tuned in a concert.

This other, good-tempered woman who lived in Mrs. Bosorov's body, presided through Saturday. Then, with her daughters and Sidney tagging along behind, she enjoyed a window-shopping tour in the town's fashionable business section. The stroll always ended in an ice cream parlor where all devoured banana splits.

Nina could never understand how her Mother could retire on a Saturday night, reasonable and relaxed,

and get up Sunday morning with horns on her head. Her behavior only varied in the object of her Sunday morning disgruntlement.

One such morning—Alex and Eugene as usual had left—she stalked from her room, ill humor wiping all beauty from her face. Her baleful glance fell on the girls and little Sidney at the breakfast table. Without preamble she started on Paula. “So don’t eat the egg if you don’t like it.”

“Who said anything about the egg? Who said anything?”

“Then don’t give me looks, you hear?” Her sullen eyes were snagged by Nina’s youngboned hands about her cup. “Humph,” she sneered, “manicures. All she can think of.”

“You manicure your nails, don’t you?”

Mrs. Bosorov, whose elegance was reserved for the street, now hair uncombed and wrapped in a disreputable kimona, drew herself up with hauteur. “You compare yourself to me?”

Sunday, without the respite of school, was misery.

The children were hardly a match for Mrs. Bosorov. They, however, had learned to cope with her rages by an infuriating silence. There was more satisfaction in sending barrages of abuse to her main target in Chicago, for Mr. Bosorov, no laggard with the pen, returned volley for volley.

“Such peace I have in my little apartment with no tigress to tear me apart,” he once wrote, a line which sent Mrs. Bosorov’s blood pressure spiraling. Her hand shook so, she could not guide the pen. Nina was summoned to write the inflammatory reply at her mother’s dictation. With the first sentence, the child

realized that the blast sounded as if she herself were composing it. She refused to sign her name and, evading her mother’s lunge, ran from the house. Mrs. Bosorov seized the pen and scratched a wobbly *Nina*.

Paula and Nina became her amanuenses, sessions of agony to them both. To make sure they put down her exact words, Mrs. Bosorov seated herself close beside them. “Write this,” she commanded, “My mother ignores your letters. She does not need to answer them. I and Paula, her daughters, answer for her. We vow to protect her from your insults.” Though Nina continued to withhold her name, Paula, whose motto was “Peace at any price,” signed hers.

The boys refused to be so used. When their mother issued her demand, they answered with double talk, thwarting her completely. “Go to your father,” she’d scream. “Let him cook and clean for you.” Their repeated resistance goaded her to create more violent scenes.

And then one day Eugene returned from his paper route alone. “You needn’t wait for Alex,” he told his mother. “He’s half way to Chicago by now.”

Nina and Paula were stunned; even Sidney stilled as he looked at his mother. She stared at Eugene, then shrugged. “Where did he get the money?” she asked.

“From Papa.” Eugene’s blue eyes were cold with satisfaction. “We’ve been corresponding with him through general delivery.”

She reared back, her eyes wild as those of a racehorse confronted with a treacherous jump. “Go to him yourself, why don’t you? Who needs you?”

"Don't worry," said Eugene, "I intend to."

She clasped a hand to her breast. "My heart," she panted. Paula, as familiar with this stratagem as the rest of the family, rushed for a dill pickle, sliced it lengthwise, wrapped it in a dampened towel. Her mother snatched it, tottered to her room, and collapsed with a groan.

She was still asleep the next morning when the children left for school. But Nina returned later in the afternoon to find her sitting in the kitchen, woebegone and bewildered.

"It's so dark in here," she said, talking through her astonishment. "Mama? Shall I make some tea?" No answer. Putting the kettle on, Nina watched her and thought, she seems to be thinking *My life is going all wrong and through no fault of my own.* "She doesn't see what she does," Nina told herself, "Can you blame her, if she's blind?" She placed the tea before the unhappy woman, but did not snap on the light, for that could disperse this pathetic mood, whose cause Nina was anxious to know.

"I had such a nightmare last night," said Mrs. Bosorov. "I dreamt I was walking on a lonely road and a big tree kept moving beside me. Every time I took a step, a huge branch tore off and fell at my feet." Her voice broke. "I kept falling over it."

"Perhaps tonight you'll have the dream you often have. You told us about it, remember? Doves, flying."

"Yes. A dream like that is a good sign," said Mrs. Bosorov.

She may have had such a dream that night, and it may have been a good sign, for the next day, a year from the week he left, Mr. Bosorov

wrote to say he was returning for a visit.

Mrs. Bosorov threw back her head and laughed in triumph. It was the last act of the melodrama, in which the erring husband comes back and on bended knee begs forgiveness. But not until he promises to make up for all he had ever denied her, she told Nina, would she live with him again as his wife.

"And I'll never part with the suite," she went on. "Even in a big house, it could be used in the reception hall."

Nina was aghast. Her mother actually expected her father to set her up in a mansion. That repentance might not put money in his pocket was a detail she ignored.

Then Mrs. Bosorov, not a woman to neglect taking advantage of one in a remorseful mood, had a brilliant idea. She would have the suite reupholstered.

From the moment it was carted off, some spring within her broke loose, flooding her with happy vigor. She laughed, sang Russian songs, made charming dresses for the girls. The children held their breaths as though standing before someone in a trance.

The upholsterer promised the suite in ten days, and had been cautioned not to appear with his bill until the eleventh day, when Mr. Bosorov was due, and then not before eight in the evening. By that time, Mrs. Bosorov assured Nina, he would have gorged himself on her excellent cuisine and be in a mood to pay whatever the cost.

The furniture was delivered on schedule. The appearance of the first piece was a shock. Mrs. Bosorov had selected a gold moire from the upholsterer's samples. It was like having

chosen a sunbeam and being hit by a blast of sunlight. The expanse used on the settee proved to be too gold, blindingly gold. The chairs, as one by one they were hauled in, seemed mortified by what had been done to their seats. The suite, Nina decided, had been lovelier in its heavy, gently faded red satin.

Mrs. Bosorov looked sick. She accused the upholsterer of having substituted her suite for a cheap copy. After some argument, even she had to admit that a duplicate of her furniture did not exist, unless in some forgotten corner of Europe.

When all was arranged and the curtains dimmed, she appeared somewhat mollified. Nina, however, thought the seats in the dimmed room blazed like so many flashlights.

On the homecoming morning Mrs. Bosorov kept the girls from school to clean the flat. Sidney, afraid of missing something, doubled over, a hand on his middle, crying stomach ache, though Mrs. Bosorov was too excited to know or care whether he went to school that day or not.

Her bedroom received the utmost considerations, new curtains and everything new for the big double bed in which she must have been lonely all the past year. Deciding against a bedspread, she folded back a corner, most invitingly. At that instant Paula was heard crying, "Sidney, stop jumping on the new upholstery." Mrs. Bosorov rushed in to murder him, but he escaped. As if it were a game, he slipped back to jump on one seat after another until his mother caught him and boxed his ears. Nina sneaked a cut of almond bread for him and put an end to his howls.

The children wanted the fatted-calf dinner served in the dining room,

but Mrs. Bosorov said, "No." The room would be cold, for she planned to let the furnace fire die. She had no intention of letting Mr. Bosorov assume that what he provided kept them in coal. Eugene gave her a withering glance, then inserted the leaf in the old dining-room table in the kitchen. But when Mrs. Bosorov told the girls she certainly would not meet their father at the train, they were heartbroken. Eugene said he certainly would. Nina, who wanted desperately to go along, knew better than to say so.

At ten after six, the children heard the downstairs door open and all but fell down the stairs in their excitement. In the semi-dark stairwell, Mr. Bosorov's face bent to their upreaching arms and lips. He gathered and held them together like a bouquet, reassured of their love. When they mounted to the lighted landing, Nina saw the glisten of tears in his eyes.

They opened the kitchen door. Mrs. Bosorov did not turn her head. In her prettiest black dress and pink petal of an apron, she moved pots on the stove, wearing a face of tragedy. Mr. Bosorov turned to Eugene. "Better leave my suitcase in the hall." Mrs. Bosorov accorded him an indifferent glance. "You're only staying for dinner?"

He gave her a long reproachful gaze, then sighed. "I think I'll wash up," he said. The children looked at their mother as if they had been holding a gift she had snatched from their hands. "Nina," she whispered. "Quick. In the dining-room cupboard you'll find a bottle of schnapps."

Mr. Bosorov returned, rubbing his hands, humming a tune, smiling a little as if to say, "Well, this is a

visit and not even the tigress is going to spoil it for me."

Mrs. Bosorov did not look at him as she ordered the children to sit down. But surrounding his place was the brandy, the chopped chicken liver, a variety of his favorite breads in the silver basket. As if elves in the night had dropped everything there, she busied herself at the stove, her back to the table.

"Sonia," Mr. Bosorov pleaded, "sit down with us."

"Don't start telling me what to do," she warned.

He considered her rigid back, downed a glass of schnapps as if he needed it, gave his head a brisk shake, then bit into some liver-spread pumpernickel. His face relaxed. "No better in the finest of restaurants."

"You know about fine restaurants. I don't." And turning her aggrieved face to set before him a bowl of chicken soup afloat with airy matzos balls, caught him serving the children pieces of rye-spread appetizer. She flared with jealousy. "Are they two years old? They can't help themselves?"

"Papa," Eugene hurried to say, "tell us about Chicago."

Mr. Bosorov smiled. "Coming back, looking at the streets, I saw Boston had shrunk." He made a face that sent the children into laughter. "Chicago is *new*. Tremendous. Boulevards so wide you can hardly see to the other side. And—"

"Humph," his wife broke in. "Nothing's wrong with Boston. The seat of culture. Plenty men making millions here."

Seemingly unperturbed, Mr. Bosorov continued. "Every Saturday night I go with Alex to Symphony Hall. We climb almost to Heaven.

But for fifty cents we listen like in Heaven."

Mrs. Bosorov let out a hoot. "A music lover all of a sudden."

"Oh, Mama," Paula begged. Her mother silenced her with a glare as she placed before her husband a savory pot roast.

His face had sobered, his lids were broodingly lowered as he carved the beef. Nina, passing the plates, was surprised to catch her mother gaze at her father with a surreptitious admiration that voided her disparagements. Was she being hateful because he hadn't yet begged forgiveness? She glanced at her father and saw no such inclination on his face. "Tender," he murmured of the beef.

"To you it should be tender," said Mrs. Bosorov. "I see you had a job done on your teeth. I can't afford a filling."

Mr. Bosorov put down his fork. The children looked as if they were lost in the woods, hearing the rumble of thunder.

"Papa," Nina hurried to say, "how is Alex?"

"A darling boy." Again he smiled. "Brilliant. Another month he graduates high school. Then he goes to law college."

Mrs. Bosorov clattered pans in the sink. "No better colleges than in Boston. Here he could go nights and work days."

Mr. Bosorov thoughtfully lighted a cigarette. "A wife," he said, his voice stern, "goes where her man can make a good living. We have fine sons, beautiful daughters. They're growing up. Girls, especially, need a nice home where they can bring their friends."

"A good enough home they have now," shouted Mrs. Bosorov, who wanted a mansion for herself. "A

man who loves a girl will marry her even if she lived in a slum."

"I didn't find you in any slum."

But Mrs. Bosorov had no ears. Her eyes blazed as she set down a sponge cake. "The children will grow up and find their own lives. But what about *me*? What is waiting for me in Chi—"

The doorbell rang. The bowl of compote slipped as she set it on the table. Nina seized a napkin to blot the overspill. Mrs. Bosorov opened the door. And there, in his Sabbath suit, hat in hand, stood the upholsterer.

"Mister Morris!" Mrs. Bosorov dissembled delighted surprise. "Come in. Sit down. We're just having tea." She turned to her husband, and sounding as if she had just gargled with honey said, "You remember Mister Morris? The upholsterer? Of course you remember him."

Mr. Bosorov eyed the man without recognition. Mr. Morris gave him a wary smile, sat down, and accepted a glass of tea.

"Bernard," said Mrs. Bosorov, for the first time in years according him the dignity of his own name. "Mister Morris upholstered our suite."

Mr. Bosorov looked like a man surfacing to some irrelevancy.

"What do you think of a man, Mister Morris," and she laughed, "who is away for a year, comes back, and sits down to eat before he looks to see if anything is changed?"

Mr. Bosorov, now alerted, sprang to his feet. Followed by Nina, Paula, and Sidney, he entered the living room. Within thirty seconds he looked, grimaced, returned, and sat down.

"Well?" Mrs. Bosorov's voice was uncertain.

"Well, what?" he said pleasantly.

"If you like it." Again he grimaced. "I'm glad you could afford the job."

Mr. Morris produced a long envelope and sort of nudged it before his host. Mr. Bosorov glanced at it, then at Mr. Morris, then at his wife, and smelled the complicity between them. He ripped open the envelope. In the climactic silence, only Mr. Morris was heard noisily sipping his tea.

"Do you know what I went without to come back?" asked Mr. Bosorov, in words low and distinct. "What I went without for a year? Do you know," he demanded, his tone accelerating, "there is a depression?" He arose. "Do you think," he roared, "I turn on a faucet and money streams out? Bandit!" His fist came down on the table with a blow that loosened the center leaf. The table caved in, and everything was on the floor, the compote, the tea, the cake, the glasses—all spilled, all broken. Only Sidney let out a brief explosive laugh. Mr. Bosorov, sunk in despair, strode from the room. Mr. Morris fled. The children hurried to set things to rights.

"What's the matter with him?" Mrs. Bosorov asked of the air. "A man pays his bills." But her voice had lost its power.

When Mr. Bosorov returned, Eugene at his side, both dressed to leave, she paled. "Where are you going? You just came." She began to say all that should have been said hours ago. "You've hardly visited with the children. For a whole year they missed you. I cooked to last for three days. We have things to discuss, to talk—"

Mr. Bosorov just gazed at her with the mournful eyes of a man who had come buoyed with plans that experience had all along told him were

hopeless. "I'm going to a hotel," he said.

"Why a hotel? Here is your room—your bed." She turned to Nina, as to an ally. "Tell him, darling, how we prepared—" She stopped as if breathing came too hard.

Nina's sober gaze was on her father. As though he sensed that some of her love for him was damaged, he pressed his rough hand against her warm cheek. He kissed her. "Ninela, tomorrow you'll come with Eugene, with Paula and Sidney, and we'll have lunch together, yes?" He turned to his wife. "Tell the upholsterer he'll get his money when I'm back in Chicago."

But Mrs. Bosorov had retrieved her hatchet as if she had momentarily misplaced it. "Fine father, wonderful husband. Can't stay one night in his own home." Her voice grew shrill. "You have money for hotels, for restaurants!" Her recriminations followed him down the stairs, three

flights of them, until the last door closed.

Through the living-room window, Nina looked down to see her father, holding his hat against the wind, his valise held between him and Eugene. Soon there'd be no man in the house, only little Sidney.

"Sidney!" Paula said, her voice spiritless. "Get off the new upholstery I told you." He turned in fear, but when he saw his mother in the doorway, he did not run.

She stood there, emptied, bleak. Her gaze traveled from chair to chair. "It's a little bright, the material."

Somehow, Nina felt a pang for her. "It'll fade, Mama."

"But in how many years?" Then her gaze leaped to the three of them, as if of a sudden, she glimpsed them in some advancing year, not faded—bloomed. Bloomed and gone.

She sat down heavily, her abstracted gaze on the settee. "It wasn't necessary," she said.

Night Shore

• Ross Jackson

It lapped my feet
and held.
No longer alien
the beckoning arcs
which drew me
to entombing
warmth.

Care ceased,
I walked
on ancient flesh
and slowly sank
in that fatality of peace.

Well-Oiled Fighting Machine

• Thomas J. McCabe

Paul sat there by his tent somewhat dazed. No part of him moved and his eyes stared blankly, but inside him his mind was racing backward and forward over the events of the morning. His mind would not wholly accept the facts of it yet; he kept thinking it was all something he had imagined or conjured up from some forgotten dream. He began to go over the morning again.

Dawn had come bright and clear to Charlie Battery's position near the village of Bonh Ho, Vietnam. Paul was a 2nd Lieutenant with the battery and was up for promotion to 1st Lieutenant. It was little over a year since he had graduated from college ROTC, and his tour as a Forward Observer with an Infantry Company was over. As a 1st Lieutenant he would be re-assigned as an Executive Officer to some other battery. Meanwhile, he had a few days rest at Charlie's firing position.

At about 0700 hours the Captain came around to Paul's tent. "The mail chopper reports there was absolutely no one in sight when he went over Bonh Ho. You're the only officer I can spare, so I want you to take a patrol out and see what gives."

In about an hour the patrol had been readied and briefed, and they started off due north towards the village. Paul fingered his M-16 and thought of the many hours he had practiced with it. At first, he had stuck to firing at targets on the improvised range. Then one day one

of the sergeants took him aside. "Listen here, Lieutenant, ol' Charlie isn't gonna sit there in a hundred, two hundred meters out and wait for you to shoot 'im. He's gonna be ten meters away, behind a tree or around the corner of a hut. You gotta train yourself to react quick-like and shoot from the hip if you wanna live long. You gotta be ready for Charlie to be real close and real fast. Only—you gotta be faster."

For the next three weeks while Paul became familiar with the Artillery Camp, the Sergeant and he practiced with the M-16. By the end of the third week his reactions were automatic and his accuracy outstanding. The Sergeant paid him his highest compliment. "Lieutenant, you're one of the best pupils I ever had. You're just like a well-oiled fightin' machine now."

Later, the thought occurred to Paul that the word *killing* might have been more appropriate than *fighting*.

When the patrol got near the village, Paul sent the "point" man on ahead. His report coincided with the chopper pilot's: not a villager in sight.

The patrol entered the hamlet cautiously, in a wide dispersion. They were to sweep through once, reform on the other side, and come back through the place a second time. If any shooting started, they'd fight their way back to the rally point, and radio the Artillery Camp for support fire.

As they started through, Paul felt no fear at all, only tensed excitement. He had never been this engaged before, because the Forward Observer usually stayed with the Company Commander, never with the leading troops.

The huts got closer together as the men neared the center of the village. Paul's M-16 was at his side, in his right hand. This was the ready position for him. All he had to do was bring his right hand up, grasp the rifle with his left hand, and *zap!* He had thumbed the safety to *semi*, as they entered, but now he moved it to *auto*.

After passing eight huts without incident, he felt his nerves stretched taut. As he passed the corner of the ninth hut, his eye caught a movement to his left. *V.C.!* The self-defense instincts took hold in him. The trained reactions came without thought. He pivoted to the left and went into a crouch as the weapon came up. Instinctive reaction came so fast the brain had no chance to evaluate the target before all twenty rounds of hot death squirted at the Vietnamese. The villager was lifted up and violently thrown back by the force of the bullets. Paul froze there in his crouch, and a wisp of smoke from the hot rifle drifted past his eyes.

It was the first time he had ever shot at a person, and the violence of his attack surprised even himself.

He had just reached the body when the first of his patrol came up. Even as they opened their mouths in question, they saw the body, and he saw something else. There amidst the gore of a totally shattered body was the pretty, almost beautiful face of a girl.

The Captain had accepted the Ser-

geant's story that she was probably going to use the knife she had, and it was a good thing the Lieutenant had reacted so quickly. But Paul knew. He knew that the knife she carried was the small heavy-handled type the women used to clean fish. The handle was so heavy the knife couldn't possibly be thrown accurately, and she had been too far away to use it in any other manner.

The Sergeant saw him sitting by his tent and came over. He called him three times before Paul looked up. "Lieutenant, try not to take it so hard; it was an accident. It wasn't your fault at all."

Paul looked at him as if he couldn't understand what he was saying. "Not my fault? My God, I pulled the trigger, I shot her. If it's not my fault, then whose is it?"

"Look, Lieutenant, you're a soldier, right? And a soldier gets paid to kill, right? Oh, I know 'defend the nation and protect freedom,' but when you get right down to it, your job is to kill. Now along with this job and in order to get it done, you've gotta stay alive. Now sometimes the two of these come right up smack together and it's a case of kill or be killed. So, to be ready for this kill or be killed deal, you've gotta be good, and that means hair-trigger response, not a second-later response. If that had been Charlie today, you woulda got him and you'da been proud of yourself; but it wasn't. So, tough. You gotta keep reactin' like it's Charlie, or you ain't gonna be around long."

"But what if the same thing happens again and I kill another woman?"

"That's a chance you gotta take if you wanna stay alive."

"A chance I have to take?" Paul gaped at him wide-eyed.

"Sure. Listen. I gotta go. You think it over, sir, and you'll see I'm right."

Paul stared at him as he walked away. So this is the kind of man I'm paid to lead, he thought. A man who would "shoot first and ask questions later," as the saying went.

He thought of all the fine sayings he had spouted in college concerning the war in Vietnam. Phrases like "We must defend the freedom of our allies" (how could they be free if they were dead?) or "Stop the spread of Communism" (by killing them before they can become communist?). He had had such a romantic view (he saw now) of war when he was in college. He had always thought of the soldiers as heroes, with a certain nobility about them, but now he realized the Sergeant was right. Their job was to kill, and there's nothing noble about killing.

In a matter of weeks his promotion to 1st Lieutenant finally came through, and he was transferred to a new battery, this time as Executive Officer. The Battery Commander seemed to be a pretty tough veteran, but Paul didn't mind. The hard work kept his mind off the incident in the village of Bonh Ho—until one day when the memory of it was sharply revived.

He was sitting in the command bunker when the Captain entered with a Vietnamese civilian. "Here's a good chance for you to learn some of the local terrain," he said. "This man says one of the nearby villages has been deserted, but he doesn't know why. I figure it might be a trap, but it might also indicate the V.C. are moving in for an attack on us. I want you to take a patrol out for a look-see. Anything wrong, Lieu-

tenant?"

Paul had turned pale with the memory of the other patrol. "Why, no sir, just taken a little off guard."

"Well, get on guard and get the show on the road."

Three hours later they were approaching the village. Paul again sent out one man to eyeball the place. He reported back: Not a stir.

As they moved into the village, Paul thought of the Sergeant from Charlie Battery and what he had said. Was it simply a case of kill or be killed, let the chips fall where they may? He wasn't sure. He knew he didn't want to die, and yet the idea of killing an innocent person was repugnant to him. If only he had had more time to think before he had to take out another patrol.

His mind was full of doubt as he stepped through the village. He felt no paralyzing fear, only the tenseness he had felt before. His rifle was at his side in its ready position. He passed a third hut and a fourth, and continued on. The doubt was gradually ignored as he became absorbed in watching and listening. He was again the "well-oiled machine." His mind didn't really think—it just evaluated the sounds and sights of the village.

He came to two huts close together, with room to walk between them. As he walked between them, he slowed his pace. He passed the corner of the first hut and saw nothing. When he passed the corner of the second, his eye again caught something to his left. His instincts took over and his body reacted. The weapon came up and he started to squeeze, but this time he paused. For a split second he looked to see if it was a woman, and died as the bullets ripped into his body.

On Viewing a Snow Scene in Oil

• Sandra J. Brungard

In the blue shadow at the foot of the tree
In the closed house, dark and dumb
Secrets run.
And a white finger is on the lips
Of the mother hill, wagon-rutted,
Fence-gutted.

(Did you say that man against general opinion
Is component of nature more than alien king
Or fosterling?
Or only that here on a bleached hill
Outcroppings of man, commonplace
Wore grace?

I ask knowing that answers come
And quiet tells when query stops
And your ears are right
Hushed, at night.) But in day waiting
The scene seems to be an instant of holy
Placidity.

The bare-boned house, storm-charred, consentient
Says then “Amen. If it is, so to me
It must be.”
Having seen the Silurian and ensuing eons
The white-laced trees still elect to
Stand true.

While the road alone runs to the sun
As it was meant to do. Did it seem so
To you?

The Stuff of History

• Raymond Johnson

Pales was a bit overweight, but he was still a handsome man, and as he shaved, he admired his image, considering how pleasant it was to be a man, how pleasant to be the man he was. He nicked himself, where the Adam's apple raised a mound of flesh. A little line of blood. He shuddered, thinking about Negroes. He had been hired by a Negro to kill a Negro. He smiled. Pales, the bravest man in the Republic. He rinsed the shaving cream off his face and inspected his teeth. He wondered if he should just have them all pulled out. Get the whole business over with. He rubbed the spot on his forehead. Cancer?

His bowling had been poor. It had been three months since he had rolled a two-hundred game. The last one had been that Thursday just before Martha had taken the children and left Africa. Left him. Three months less one day. And the more he thought about it, the happier a stroke of luck it seemed. But what had happened only two weeks later was even more fortunate—the revolution had begun. With it going on, a man didn't have to be just another free-lance pilot. Now a man could get all sorts of jobs, be a big man. Retire young. Even him. Even Pales. Even that handsome man in the mirror.

Tomorrow. Sell the house. Sell the car. Buy a boat ticket to Europe. Rome, London—just no more Africa. One long, grand vacation, beginning

tomorrow, lasting the rest of his life. After today, a man like that one in the mirror would deserve it.

* * *

In the privacy of the airport's shoddy little pine-paneled VIP room, while the King of Zamwala watched over his shoulder, John Bassana Kewantee had written a promised letter home, as he had done so many times before, saying he was well, would be back on Tuesday, and wanted his wife to give their daughter a pat on the head for him. Before he gave the letter to the protocol officer, for mailing, he wished for just a moment that it had been given to him to be able to love.

Then he and the King, an angry old man with gold rings hanging from his earlobes and a Sears and Roebuck sarong, went together to the ramp, made guardedly optimistic statements to the reporters who had waited half the night for some news, and shook hands distrustfully. John Kewantee, the first African to become Secretary General, nodded to the onlookers and went up the ramp and into the charter plane, to join his advisors, an elderly Irishman and a Malaysian lawyer. When the door had slammed shut, he ordered coffee. Between this miserable jungle capital and the airstrip at Numbola, there was work to be done, and the slamming of the door was a signal for it to begin. As soon as they were airborne and could unfasten their seat

belts, he and the Irishman and the Malaysian sat in the lounge of the plane and went over their papers one last time and discussed the intentions of the king with whom they had just conferred.

Well they might: all of Africa, all the world was involved in the Macomba question. The great powers had taken conflicting stands on it, and in the Macomba Republic itself, a man who called himself the Lord of the World was now in full revolt against the government; it was even rumored that he had bought an antique biplane and had established an air force and might soon bomb the capital city, Macomba. The central government was threatened, too, by the king they had just talked to, who had advised the Prime Minister of Macomba that he and his fourteen wives would attack on the second day of the next month if his wives had not by that date been given one of the northern provinces of Macomba. It would all have been immensely funny, if only the lives of several billion people were not literally at hazard. But they were; and the Lord of the World had advised the press that he had a peace plan, but that he would present it to no one in the world but his kinsman, the Secretary General, whom he trusted above all men.

* * *

Pales could not remember the night when he had had nothing to drink. Every morning he told himself not tonight; but every night it was the same. If today didn't work out—if he didn't quit flying, some one of these days he'd be hung over and would misread a map, and that would be the end of him.

He pushed the thought down, as

he always did, and he nodded to the Negro standing down there in the grass, waving up at him, smiling a toothy smile. When he bothered to think about them, Pales hated Negroes. But it was not often that he bothered about anything.

This was a day, however, when he would have something to do with Negroes; so as he waited for the engine to smooth out, he smiled down at the smiling native, who could not possibly hear above the roar of the engine, and he waved cheerily and said, "So long, you dear Nigger!"

The native, who was a very good mechanic, pointed to the revving propeller, put his finger on his nose, and smiled even more broadly. Pales nodded, and gunned the engine, and pulled the old biplane out toward the grass runway, almost knocking the native down on the way.

As the machine rose into the air, Pales experienced once again the same elemental, childlike excitement he had had the first time he ever flew. This was the best. This was the real thing. Martha had loved flying, too. That had always been good between them. He hoped she would not let Betsy or Lou marry a Negro. That would be terrible. Happy, getting married to one of them with a big, thick smile.

He banked, set his course at three hundred twelve degrees by his pocket compass, and looked about at the fine cumulus clouds, trees in his forest. He was a happy man, a man going to work.

* * *

John Bassana Kewantee, Henry Mulloy, and Mahmud Rhazak had said what they could say about the papers at hand, and now they had only to wait. It was a comfortable

way to wait, reminiscing with colleagues who had been poor too. The Irishman and the Malaysian talked for a long time about the dogs that roamed the streets of the villages where they had been children. John Kewantee listened. It was not until the conversation turned to village fights that he seemed to take any interest. Presently, he even offered to tell them a story. It would be, he told them, the story of how he had once fought with his cousin, the Lord of the World, the man they were now flying to see. "It is an illustrative incident," he said. "It has been most important in my career. And it is, as a matter of fact, something I had intended that you should hear before we arrive. Shall I tell it now?"

"If it'll keep you out of trouble," said the old Irishman, who was sufficiently unceremonious to have been an advisor to one statesman or another for over forty-five years.

The Malaysian, who had in mind being the next Secretary General, said, "We would be honored." And he smiled with subtle purpose.

"It happened when we were both urchins in a village on the outskirts of the city of Macomba, between the military occupation post and the city dump. I call it a village, but it was really a shantytown. It was a miserable place in which to live, of course. We were all ill, in one way or another, and we were all terribly ignorant. And our European friends inside the post did not press us to learn the things that might help us throw them out.

"Looking back, I believe the experience must have been hardest for the soldiers who served in the fort. They knew how much better things were elsewhere. None of us did. Even wandering over the dump, picking up

what we could find to eat, or what bits of gaudy cloth we could use to decorate ourselves, we were still richer than we had ever been. All cities are Europe, you know. And we were very near Macomba. We did not live the good life, but we did live. And for the first time, we understood despair, because for the first time we felt a wind of hope."

He paused, touching his little finger to the corner of his mouth. He caressed his lower lip. "Shall I order more coffee? Or tea?"

The Malaysian smiled. "No, thank you, Mr. Secretary."

The Irishman said, with a shrewd little whine, "Perhaps laced with a bit of Irish dew—for an old man's blood."

Impassively, the Secretary General summoned the stewardess and ordered a coffee and a coffee Irish. The Malaysian watched patiently, making a mental record of every gesture the Secretary General made. Obviously making a record.

John Bassana Kewantee went on with his story. "It is very difficult to understand what stealing is all about, when you are living atop a garbage heap. But we had not yet forgotten completely our tribal sayings, and when the priests of the Europeans preached, as they quite frequently did, about Moses and the commandment not to steal, most of us thought more than anything of one of the tribal sayings that had stayed with us: Beware the man who steals a pig—he may need your honor tomorrow.

"Well, my cousin, the Lord of the World, stole a pig—a European pig. And he slaughtered it and brought it home to his parents, who thrashed him for having stolen something that belonged to the Commandant of the

military post. But as soon as his father had beaten him properly, his mother admonished him to say nothing to anyone, because the only thing she knew to do with a dead pig was to eat it before somebody else did.

"In the meantime, the Commandant had discovered that his pig was gone. His name was Reynolds—the Commandant, that is—and he loved animals. He had a very big nose and he loved animals. At the time, I thought him very sentimental about that pig. Later I learned that what interested him was some biological oddity—the size of the creature's nostrils, or something of the kind. But at the time I thought him only concerned with something too frivolous for me to understand: the loss of a pet.

"Well, gentlemen, I am the key figure in this adventure, because the Commandant issued a proclamation declaring an appropriate reward for anyone who would help locate that pig, and an appropriate punishment for anyone who should withhold information; and I was the only person who had chanced to be up early enough that morning to see the Lord running down the street with a pig under his arm. I could put into the power of the authorities, if I wished, my blood relation, the boy hated by everybody in our shantytown, because he rebelled against every authority—tribal and modern. Or I could violate the law of the Europeans, holding my peace, letting the thief and his family gorge themselves, to be ill by themselves.

"It was not an easy decision for a boy of ten to make. But there was no one to help me make it. If I asked one of my own people, they would see to it that I did not report to the Commandant. And I surely could not ask

a European any question which began, 'What would you say an African boy should do if—?' You never ask a European a theoretical question anyway, you know.

"Well, it took me a day and a night and a morning to decide—almost enough time for the Lord and his family to finish eating the pig. During that time, I did not sleep, and I did not talk to anyone. I went beyond the garbage dump to a putrid little stream, which was the prettiest place I knew, and I thought harder than I had ever thought before. And what kept coming back to my mind were two things: the first was a phrase I had heard when the Commandant's proclamation was read. The phrase was 'law and order in the realm.' Even today, it sounds to me like a magic incantation. Law and order in the realm. One's realm grows, though.

"The other thing that kept coming back to me was that saying of our people: Beware the man who steals a pig.

"European magic and African wisdom. They both told me what to do. You know, don't you, about European magic? For four hundred years, Europe controlled the world with little magic phrases. Until one day we all learned to say them. And that, too, has something to do with this story.

"In any event, the next day I presented myself at the Europeans' mess and asked to speak to the Commandant. I stood beside his chair and told my story. Not once did he pause in his eating to take note of me. But when he had finished his sweet, he looked up and said, 'You're a very brave boy. What's your name?' I told him, and he said, sucking at a piece of meat between his teeth, 'Do you suppose you can go back to liv-

ing in the village now? Safely? I mean—you know what they'll say about you, don't you?" I had some idea, but I shook my head and he said, with a supercilious little smile that I shall never forget, 'Well, you're an informer, aren't you now?' The plain saying of it rather dazed me. He was looking up at me—measuring me, I think. He said, 'Well, go home and get some sleep. You need it. And do think about what you'd like most in the world. I can probably get it for you. You're a brave boy.' He got up, patted me on the shoulder, and left me alone with smells of all the most wonderful food in the world.

"I trudged home very reluctantly and went to sleep. When I awoke, I discovered that my life had changed quite completely. Quite completely."

The Secretary General interrupted his narrative to call for more coffee. The Irishman lit a pipe and gazed out at the jungle beneath them. The Malaysian was looking at his shoes, thinking of the day he had first set foot on European soil. He had had only one pair of shoes, and no rubbers, and it was raining a soaking rain.

The Secretary General resumed, in his odd, flat, methodical way. "When I awoke, my family all came and stood around my pallet and looked down at me. I looked up at them for a long time and there was silence between us. That was the first time that I was ever completely calm—without any fear at all. They were my family, but I didn't care. And I still don't. Which is the secret of my success. That, however, is something one can't tell the reporters, can one?

"When I got up from my pallet, my mother said to me, 'The Europeans are looking for your second cousin.

He is waiting to fight you, out near the Hill.' The Hill was the name we gave our mountain of garbage. So I ate a piece of bread and went, not to the Hill, but to the post and Commandant Reynolds. I told him that what I wanted more than anything else was to be European. When he heard that, he laughed more heartily than any man ever has in my presence. I suppose that was the last thing he ever expected to hear an African confess.

"Well, as you know, he made me a European. That was not necessary for your generation, Rhazak, but it was for mine. So I became—what I am; and the Lord of the World became a hero.

"But the moral of this story lies in my fight—such as it was—with my cousin. It happened the day after I had failed to meet him on the Hill. The Commandant had told me that to become European, I had only to study, but that to study I would have to live on the base, where there were books, and food, and electric lights, and pencils. And people who would care. So I was on my way, with my clothes in a little knot, when the Lord of the World, who still hadn't been caught by the Europeans, stopped me. What he really did was to jump out at me from behind the Women's Tree, where all bad women were made to sit for punishment. He held me, swearing a bloody tribal oath to hate me until I was dead. And from behind some great boulders nearby, rushed most of the boys of the village—he had organized them, of course—and began to thrash me. I cried out, and that was when the Europeans caught the Lord of the World and put him in their prison for stealing the pig.

"And I have not seen him since.

Before independence, he was in and out of European jails; since, he has been in and out of African jails. Meanwhile, I have been more cooperative with authority, and considerably less popular with anybody—even the Europeans. He has been my other self, so to speak, and a few years ago when I was elected Secretary General, I got a present from him, a branch from the Women's Tree. He has not forgotten.

“Now you see why I have told you this story. The one thing you could not know about the situation in Macomba is that the bitterness of a shantytown struggle many years ago is also a fact today—perhaps the most important fact. Today we are going to settle, once and for all, the issue between two village urchins. That is why I had to come here myself—to give my cousin a chance to hold me, while his friends pommel me a bit. Then, perhaps, there will be a chance for Macomba.”

For the first time that either of his aides had ever heard, Bassana Kewantee laughed. “The stuff of history,” he said, and lapsed into silence.

“We will follow your lead, sir,” said the Malaysian obsequiously.

* * *

By then, Pales's old biplane was very near their aircraft. He had begun to suffer regret at the death he was to cause. He always felt terribly sorry in the presence of death. Every death was, to him, the death of his mother. He did not think of it in that way, but the fact was that the death of his mother only entered his mind in the presence of some other death, and that he never saw any death but that he did think of his mother.

He touched his finger to his breast

pocket, where he always carried a picture of himself that his daughter, Lou, had drawn. She had given him a round body, a tiny head, legs no wider than a pencil mark, and no arms at all. It was all he had from either of his children. He cherished it as though it had been a lock of hair from a saint. He always touched it before he did anything brave.

The Negro was late. Pales had been flying patrol for over an hour in an area not far from the Numbola airstrip, and he was hungry. There was no radar at Numbola, so there was no danger, but still he wished the whole business were over. It was an important day, and he was getting nervous about this thing.

He patrolled two minutes down the valley of the muddy Antwa and two minutes back. Two minutes and two minutes, two minutes and two minutes. He could not miss the Negro's plane. He hated that muddy water down there; he hated the flat miserable jungle around it. He was going to leave it. When he was done with this day's work, the only other job of work he would ever have to do would be to drive from his landing strip to rebel Numbola down there. That was where he would become a rich man. It would be as simple as that. And an hour back to Macomba, and tomorrow he would leave and never, never, never come back.

He hadn't blamed his wife. He had always wanted out, too. And at last, he was on the way out. He would die in bed, not in a nest of cobras. He would go back where there was air conditioning. Cool air. No snakes. Somewhere dry.

He saw the charter plane. He had not missed it. He pulled his old bi-

plane up, hard up. In good time he was ready for the dive.

* * *

Just before the pilot broke in over the intercom, the Irishman was jesting. "I am too old for anything—other than people—to matter to me. But I do believe that the two of you still care about power. That's why you're so unhappy, you see. You're here by design, not by accident, like me. You'd better watch out, Rhazak, you'll lose your sense of humor, like Mr. Secretary General here." He chuckled. Neither of his companions smiled.

That was when the captain shouted, "Seat belts! He's heading for us! Seat belts!"

The plane lurched downward. Only the Irishman looked terrified.

"Stupid!" said the Secretary General, as the plane hit the first branch.

* * *

That night in Macomba, Pales was drunk. He picked up a Mulatto girl. He called her "my little brownie," and he bragged to her about how rich he was, and he showed her enough cash to make her gasp and a check she thought was a joke. When she arched her eyebrows and asked him how a man got rich, he told her that if he was driving a car or flying an airplane, he'd as soon ram a man as change course. She was delighted, and she told him about her father. He was a European too, and he owned

an automobile, and he took her and her mother out on the bay road and drove very fast as near as he could to the edge, trying to make them scream. Her mother always cried out, but she did not. She liked brave men like Pales and her father.

They had a fine evening, and before he left her, though he had never kissed a non-European before, he kissed her goodnight. He promised to call her before he left Macomba and, quite pleased with himself, he drove carefully toward home. On the way, he stopped to buy a newspaper. The first page was edged in black. It reported the accidental death of the Secretary General, "a warm friend of all men and every man, a great citizen of the world." It discounted reports of another plane in the area. It gave a prominent place to a statement by the Lord of the World, which said among other things, "The death of my kinsman, the Secretary General, has deeply shocked me. I think we should all pledge, in his honor, even greater efforts to settle the crisis. For my part, as a gesture of good will, I have disbanded my air force. Moreover, I am willing to meet the Prime Minister any day, anywhere, to discuss the formation of a government of national unity. Let peace be our monument to our beloved Bassana Kewantee."

For a long time, Pales sat behind the wheel of his car, reading by the light of a newly-installed street lamp. He was amused. He could well afford to be.

Your Main Attraction

• David M. Gordon

To watch a gull sail down over the point!
unmoving wings keeping abreast of the wind,
isle-sighted eye aimed at a mercator line,
deer-season sky keeping her from the shore,
and yet she knows which smacks have raised their seines
and whose orange lobster buoys remain
after their traps were pirated in the war:
the fisherman's fight to fix his own demesne.
and pay taxes to save prosperity's store.

The gull sails past two sea-crows whose laughter
echoes from the portals of a rich man
now skiing in Bermuda and being tan
with a bitch they say's his draft-board's daughter;
past poor fisher-shacks that line the water
with gull-white wash and brats who toe the line,
and here and there they talk about the bomb
because their sons are sent to Viet Nam.

Flying past she comes to rows of cottages
vacantly boomerang back the sound of sense
from the working waves' autumnal cadence,
now that the owners have resumed their frown
within row-houses of Jersey's strike-towns.

Cross-winds suddenly thrust her higher in the air—
at Polins Ledges there's always a change—
but all Muscongus Sound's her family-range,
and she climbs the winds as though on a stair
to survey the cliffs that rise abruptly
at the light-house telescope, then quickly
slopes wing over wing to descend by spiral,
slants sail above steeple and store of a harbor,
then sits upon the water and shakes her tail.

The Woman Who Loved Worms

• Colette Inez

(from a Japanese legend)

Disdaining butterflies
as frivolous,
she puttered with caterpillars,
and wore a coarse kimono,
crinkled and loose at the neck.

Refused to tweeze her brows
to crescents,
and scowled beneath dark bands
of caterpillar fur.

Even the stationery
on which she scrawled
unkempt calligraphy,
startled the jade-inlaid
indolent ladies,
whom she despised
like the butterflies
wafting kimono sleeves
through senseless poems
about moonsets and peonies;
popular rot of the times.

No, she loved worms,
blackening the moon of her nails
with mud and slugs,
root-gnawing grubs,
and the wing case of beetles.

And crouched in the garden,
tugging at her unpinned hair,
weevils queuing across her bare
and unbound feet.

Swift as wasps, the years.
Midge, tick, and maggot words
crowded her haikus,
and lines on her face turned her old,
thin as a spinster cricket.

Noon in the snow pavilion,
Gulping heated saki,
she recalled Lord Unamuro,
preposterous toad
squatting by the tea tray,
proposing, with conditions,
a suitable marriage.

Ha! She stoned imaginary butterflies
and pinching dirt,
crawled to death's cocoon
dragging a moth to inspect
in the long afternoon.

Fluoroscope

• Charles Edward Eaton

There was nothing in the heart, nothing
in the chest.

The naked man looked all unhung
Where the watch and chain had swung
Across the pattern of his vest.

The belt was missing and the pants,
The drawers were just a flimsy mesh:
Here's brutal revelation of the flesh,
Each organ at the whim of chance.

One cannot help regret the heap,
The tie one wore, the rakish hat;
Though one is somewhat more than that,
We would not jeopardize the castle keep.

And yet the leaning tower is scanned
As if it harbored things in trust;
Desire is hunted down like lust
Which roves a map, quite out of hand.

Found whole, found healthy, and thought sane,
We pick up goblets of a world just scattered—
Two men walk freely where it really mattered
If one cast glory on a windowpane.

The Volunteer

• Thomas A. West, Jr.

He knew damn well he should never have come, but what's a man to do? Nineteen, not even close to twenty, and he was pinned down in this miserable unpronounceable hole ten thousand miles from home. Where was that? He tried remembering. Home. He couldn't remember. Home was where the heart was, and surer than hell he left it there right where it belonged so it could survive in a climate that wasn't one hundred percent humidity, where it wouldn't have been subjected to a million insects swarming down upon him like a sky full of choppers. Home was New England, autumn, stone walls and *hard* ground and paved roads and orange juice and air you could breathe without feeling swollen and hot in your lungs. But he couldn't remember.

He stared at his arm as he lay in the little absurd doll-like valley. He saw part of his wrist watch jutting out from his fatigues, and he silently cursed his stupidity for not covering the surface with mud so there wouldn't be a reflection. Just one careless move, that's all it ever took. He wondered if that's how they'd find him, if they ever did. What a stupid, idiotic bastard he was.

The mortar round intended for them viciously punched the earth several dozen yards away.

"Hey, kid," the pilot said next to him. "Which way? You lead, buddy, we're all yours."

Steve Poling was terrified all at once.

A colossal fear washed up on him like a slow Arctic tidal wave. He couldn't move. He just stared at the little crescent of naked watch crystal, and waited for the copter pilot to call him again.

"Kid? You all right?"

"Yes," he said. "Sure."

"Then let's get the hell out of here."

The voice was urgent and it had command in it—a captain's or major's—and it was enough, barely enough to call Private Poling back from drowning. He looked up, squinting to the sun. He then followed it down to the jungle treetops. Where was the one particular landmark? There—no, there? There. It had a peculiar twist of limb he could just make out.

Another mortar round cracked the ground, this time spraying them with foliage and jagged bits of branch.

"Now," he whispered to the two men, but as he rose he heard a machine gun sputtering wickedly off to his right, and he instinctively plunged face forward.

"We're pinned down here," he said to himself, and the pilot swore. The other man, a gunner probably—he had had no time to talk to either of them after their crash—the gunner began a baby-like wailing. Steve's blood froze. He turned to the pilot, who looked at him, and they both wriggled back to the gunner, who was on his back, his colorless face up, his white hands in useless

fists alongside his chest as though he were trying to hold yarn. Before they reached him, he was dead. The embarrassing baby cries were shut off. Not a visible mark on him, as far as Steve could see; so he imagined vast holes lining in the gunner's body beneath his jacket.

The pilot survived a long moment of quiet anguish. Then he reached beneath the gunner's shirt, yanked his hand away, shook warm blood off it, but it remained, most of it. He forced the same hand back where he found and removed the gunner's tags.

"Now let's try again, soldier," he said huskily.

They crawled forward.

Poling guessed they had about a thousand yards to move. He stopped. Not five feet from his face was an enormous spider the size of a full-grown hand—almost. The legs were thick as fingers, and they pulled up, drew up as if to leap on Steve's face. Instead, it backed slowly into its nest, a great, solid white-spun web with a womb.

He inched past, shuddering, and he recalled the sinister creature's legs. He imagined them stalking him like the Cong, and he wasn't sure which enemy he feared more.

Right now, he thought, he could be with his platoon with crazy Par-edee from Illinois, who had killed two Cong who couldn't have been older than ten, but they had grenades on them; they were going to pull the pins with their pathetic little claws of hands. Poling could be back with Nallinger, who was from Montana and hadn't shot down anyone yet, but who was a big, safe man to have along. He could be with Olbach, the solid Dutchman, and Sergeant Miller, who never worked a

day in his life if you listened to him talk, but who stalked like a cat, like a spider.

Poling shuddered again.

He looked back. His eyes met the Pilot's. Blue and deep and, Poling imagined, as full of fear as his were, but more professional. More cold, somehow. They'd seen fifteen years more than his, so they frowned under heavy brows and they said move on, buddy, move!

He crept on, cradling his clumsy weapon.

Two slammings in back of them trembled the soft ground.

Move ahead, Poling told himself; less than 5000 yards now; less than 15,000 feet on level earth. Thank God he didn't have a mountain ahead of him. It was simple—straight along the valley.

(I will fear no evil)

A firefight was in progress. Steve suddenly realized it came from the area where his platoon was. As he crawled like a big, slow, ungainly reptile, his other mind recalled the patrol dispatched from the battalion dispatched on a kill-mission from regiment—and he, plus Corporal Will Sorensen, dispatched from the patrol. He and Will had gotten separated somehow, back where the foliage was thicker than green quicksand, and he hadn't dared call for him.

How he had come upon the copter crew was mere luck, and at that they had nearly gunned each other down.

But Jesus—God what a stupid, idiotic thing to do, to volunteer. Well, he'd never do that again. If he got the chance.

Something bright flashed in front of him. A bayonet. He fired without thinking or looking, and then he realized he was shrieking at the yellow man rushing at him screaming at

him. His rifle worked. He saw red imprints in the man's skull, one below his right eye, the other in his forehead, all but caving it in.

Were there more?

What the hell was he doing standing up? He shrank down, looked all around him feverishly, and in the same glance saw the pilot hugging the wet earth.

Well, they knew where he was now.

"You okay, sir?" Poling finally said. His voice caught twice on fear.

The man looked up, his command gone, his face livid, and he looked exhausted and frightened.

"Yes. Okay. Go on."

"Follow me," Poling said. Then he thought what an absurd regimental-motto-sort of statement. Follow him, all right, follow the terrific nineteen-year-old deeper into the jungle, right into the hands of the Cong, into the valley of death.

The distant firefight was ended temporarily.

Steve felt the brooding silence on either side of him, above him, in front and in back of him. It waited for his movements. It lurked in every jungle pore, every breathing gap, every little black mouth in the foliage.

He was the center of attention now. He had just exposed himself, standing up like that and blasting away foolishly when he had his own bayonet. He could have used that, but even then there would have been screams. Yelling helped him cross the line to insanity so that he could kill, just as it did the enemy. And it was an explosion of fear, all bottled up for years. Every fear a man ever had was squeezed out, then came pouring out into the scream.

The body lay crushed up in front of him, right on the trail. Already there were flies. The enemy looked

so lost in death, so utterly and terribly alone. In his home no one was the wiser, no one mourned him or even knew where he'd gone, probably. They would wait for him, and wait for him, and wait, and then the gradual awareness, the reptilian thoughts would creep over their jungle minds and they would know. Would they shed a tear, then, Poling wondered. They were Orientals, weren't they? They were inhuman pigs who couldn't care less about life, weren't they?

"Move," the pilot whispered.

"Yes. Keep moving. Keep moving."

He somehow forced himself over the enemy body. Ahead on the trail was a clearing. Poling stopped.

"What's wrong?" the pilot said.

"The clearing. See it?"

"So what, man? We've got to—"

"We'd be cut down in little pieces," Steve whispered harshly. "We have to wait until the night comes."

"No! We can't stay here."

"Move off the trail—in there." He pointed to a thicket which looked particularly secure.

The pilot frowned disapproval, but nonetheless followed him in.

They drank sparingly from the private's canteen.

Steve took up the watch as both men waited, while the searing hell-sun dragged its leaden way across the sullen sky. The thicket was cool enough, but they perspired freely. It had taken strength to work through the brush as quietly as possible. Their senses had been overwrought, keyed to absolute pitch, each man's mind ready to recoil at the sight or sound of expected enemy who were everywhere.

Legend said they were everywhere. Steve heard the veterans, listened reluctantly, yet with a secret thrill, as

a boy listens in the company of heroes a whole year older than himself. And the vets said the Cong were as numerous as the leaves on the trees, as treacherous as the swamps; like rats they dug holes in the ground, and waited. Like camouflaged moths they clung to tree trunks, and waited.

Well, Poling decided, he could wait too. He was just as hidden and invincible, and he would get the pilot back to the platoon. Back to home.

He stared over at the older man.

"I'll get you there, sir. Don't worry."

The pilot's hands began to tremble. His eyes were so grateful Steve expected them to fill with tears. "I know you will, soldier. God bless you, I know you will. I'm not much help to you—I—this is my fourth crash, and by everything that lives, I've had it. I've flown so many unholy missions I couldn't count them if I wanted to. I guess you've been on as many patrols?"

"No, sir. I can count mine."

"How many?"

"One. This is it."

The pilot smiled wanly. Then he rested his head on his arms on his knees and was silent.

"I'm sorry about your gunner," Steve said, almost afraid to make any sound, yet feeling a stronger urge for a tangible comradeship.

"Who?"

"The man who died back there."

"Oh? Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I guess I must have died too. What's your name, soldier?"

"Steve Poling, Private, First Cav."

"That old outfit. We backed it up in Korea. In those days, legend or fact has it you boys charged a hill wearing your bright yellow scarfs and patches. How times have changed.

How professional we all are now, right? I'm Major Perez."

Steve nodded with respect. Well, he thought, this is what they get for sending a private to do a captain's job. A private—rescue a major: how ridiculous. Like a first semester freshman directing a professor out of a burning building. One patrol, and he was not only penned in, but got a gunner, who was probably a captain, killed; got separated from Corporal Will Sorensen right at the start; and there squatted opposite him was a full-fledged major, probably a chicken-colonel if he survived this, a veteran of Korea as well, twice his age, probably; with a family—

"Where's your home, boy?"

Funny, Poling thought. You ask a person what his name is and then call him *boy*; was he listening to anything but the sound of his own voice and the crashes he'd been in?

"Massachusetts, sir."

The major shook his head. "Never been there myself. I'm from California, L.A."

Steve nodded as the distance between them grew. Only a circumstance held them together now.

"He was a good man," Major Perez said, staring at his hand. "The Gunner, as you called him. Name was Henry Connell, came from north of Seattle. A good man. His blood is here, on my hand because I crashed. The fourth time. Jesus—Henry had three children, all little ones. O Christ!"

His blood hand began to shake violently. Steve thought the major was going off the edge: eyes wide, sweat pouring off him, but he held on, somehow. He shut his eyes, calmed himself, and leaned forward, his arms hugging his legs in close to him, his chin digging in between his knees. In

this position, like a small boy, he rocked back and forth.

So the quarter-hours inched by until a group of men came searching down the trail. Steve signaled the major to crouch down. His heart enlarged, began to lurch as it pounded mercilessly against his chest, and somehow got in the way of his lungs so that he could hardly breathe. There were distinguishable footsteps coming relentlessly forward, yet stealthy they were, with animal cautiousness. He licked his lips and was surprised that there was not enough moisture there to help the brittle dryness. He carefully moved his rifle so that it pointed at the sounds. Surely the enemy would not, *could* not see the major and him.

But he saw *them*, saw their black pajamas. Something flashed: not a bayonet this time, but his own gleaming watch crystal which reflected a single shaft of light that pinpointed his extended wrist. And before he flicked his wrist over to avoid the tiny infiltrated sun, he instinctively realized one of the V.C. had spied him. He saw or imagined he saw a face bent down, eyes blankly riveted to the tangled soil—eyes that blinked against the reflection. And the worst was there was something familiar to Steve in those eyes he saw, or imagined.

He waited for burning slugs to seek his body out and puncture it. Nothing happened. The column of enemy kept on moving past them, moving gradually and eternally along. Steve had an almost overwhelming urge to part the foliage and look. He wanted to burst out of concealment and scream with the rage in him and die firing and cursing at them. Instead, he felt cold, he shuddered and silently buried himself, hugging the

earth, thinking himself under it, yet still alive, still able to breathe.

Poling and the major were assaulted by hordes of insects which stung and withdrew blood, but never left them alone even when bloated. At least they could not penetrate the youth's fatigues, weathered to the consistency of rough horsehide. But his face, his wrists, hands, neck—they were tortured sufficiently.

Steve yearned for a cigarette. He concentrated on the ground, the foliage, moss, temperature, his leaden combat boots, his fatigues, his intolerable helmet weight, his canteen, his aching throat. And the V.C. passed them by.

The private and the major lay still for ten minutes.

Their hopes, dreams, wishes were all exploded by a hideous shriek not far away, perhaps a hundred yards. Then another. Then "Jesus, no!" which carried so clearly, so perfectly into Poling's brain his memory was struck numb. It was Corporal Will Sorensen's voice. They had him. They were doing things to him.

The cries, the imprecations, but especially the screams, kept up for five minutes until Poling could stand it no longer. He was in the act of raising himself and pitching forward toward the trail when the major grabbed him and with maniacal strength brought him crashing down.

"You damned *fool*. What they're doing to him they would love to do to you and me," he whispered fiercely. "Now you stay right here—*right here*. That's an order, boy. An order."

Poling glared at the major's cold eyes.

"That's the Corporal, that's Sorensen," Poling said.

"I don't give a damn if it's the Secretary of State. You know why

they're doing it to him? To get us to come raving out there, raving out of hiding and save him. Big heroes. You and me, we are staying put. And if you get other notions, private—”

Steve saw a .38 aimed at his head.

Through the major's sentences wound the anguished never-ending cacophony of Sorensen's shrieks, which were now more like a baby's, shrill and very high and full of disbelief.

An hour later the cries were gone, trailed off into peaceful death.

“He saw me,” Poling said to Major Perez.

“What?”

“Will Sorensen. When he walked past in the V.C. patrol.”

“How the hell would you know that?”

“I think I saw his eyes when my watch gave off a reflection.”

“Well, boy, even if he did, so what?”

“He must have known we were in here, but I never heard him cry out to us for help.

“Forget it.”

“How can I? God, Major, what a stupid thing to say.”

Perez appraised the private.

“Oh? Stupid? I don't think so, boy. You have to forget Sorensen! I have to forget Connell. We all have to forget someone out here. Me, I have already forgotten all men. I've forgotten you. That's because I don't care. You do understand? It's that simple, boy. So the way I figure it, I'm leaving cover when it's dark. You can either stay or come along. It doesn't make a damn bit of difference to me.”

“What a terrible way to die,” Poling said. “What did they do to him? What? What?”

“Get a hold of yourself, private.”

“And train myself to be a robot, sir.” Poling pronounced the *sir* with sarcasm, but the major paid no heed.

“Yes. It's the best way. It's like all of life, actually, only here things are more urgent, more down-to-earth. But back home it's the same: men get crushed as you are now.”

“And you, sir, you weren't crushed when you touched your gunner's chest? You weren't crushed then?”

The major looked away and down. Then he nodded yes. “For a moment I was. Only a moment. But your goings-on, your ravings over a non-com you didn't even know—”

“Oh, I knew him all right, sir,” Poling lied.

“Knew him? As you know me? None of us knows the other. Never. Man and wife don't even live in the same universe most of the time. Nobody identifies with the other person. What you have to learn, soldier, is that there is no communication on this planet.”

“There are some things men do for each other.”

“Heroism? Yes. Why did you come after me out here? I'll tell you. You were assigned.”

“No, sir. I volunteered.”

The major smiled.

“It's true, sir.”

“Be damned. I didn't think there were any left.”

“Any what?”

“Volunteers, I'll be damned. I thought they all got killed in Korea.”

Poling sat still and fumed. He wanted to stand up and give the major a combat boot in the face.

“What'd you volunteer for, boy?”

“Money.”

Perez's smile grew to a grin.

“Seriously.”

“Medals,” Poling amended.

"They'll give you a stripe for sure. PFC—what's-your-name?"

"Poling, sir."

"No need to get so riled up, boy. Yes, sir! PFC Poling, the volunteer who saved a halfwit major who's losing his touch, his nerve, his gunners, his sanity, and his patriotism. Yes, sir, it's a bad war, boy, a nasty war. Korea was paradise compared to it. Did you volunteer for duty here?"

"No, sir."

"Drafted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brevity is the soul of wit," someone said."

"I wouldn't know, sir."

"How old are you, private?"

"Nineteen."

"You forgot the *sir*."

"Sir."

"Nineteen. Hell, I remember when I was nineteen. I was in college getting C-minuses. They drafted me for Korea, but I signed up for the air instead. Sure as hell I didn't want the infantry, and here I am, nineteen years later—ah, well. Are you sorry you volunteered to save the pilot?"

Poling shrugged.

"That means you are. Well, son, you're a good soldier. The way you dropped that V.C. back on the trail. The way you wanted to save your friend out there. And all in the line of duty, having volunteered—"

"Christ, stop it!"

"Quiet now, boy. The V.C.—they'll come back."

Poling, outraged, ground his teeth. You came out to the middle of hell, he told himself, to save a bastard who ridiculed you all the way home.

The major stopped talking, however. He apparently left off because there was something about the blood

on his hand that bothered him, and he rubbed at it.

A distant battle crackled like a dry muffled fire somewhere; in another room in the castle, Poling thought.

It was time to move out.

There was a moon, almost full, and it glided marvelously overhead, making cloud wisps seem still. The two fugitives edged onto the trail and, crouching low, walked like age shadows to the clearing.

In the center of it was Corporal Sorensen, crucified on a crude bamboo cross lashed with vines. He was naked. The cold moonlight bathed his white body. From Poling's distance, Sorensen was a childlike figure.

"It's a trap, son," Perez whispered. "But when that big cloud blocks out the moon, we run."

Steve said nothing. He could not take his eyes from Sorensen.

The cloud drowned the moon.

Perez had to jab Poling with his elbow to get him going.

As they neared the end of the clearing, running hard, just as they were about ready to plunge into the black jungle, there was a shot. It ripped into Poling's sleeve while another followed hard upon and thudded into his shoulder, and he cried softly as he toppled over.

The major rushed ahead to comparative safety. Steve heard the major running into the jungle.

So, even so, he thought, so I am to die like the corporal.

But after several moments had gone by, he heard the major's voice.

"Get up. Hurry. There, on my shoulder; that's it, boy. Easy. Easy does it, boy."

He half-dragged the wounded boy to cover, then gently set him down, took his M-14, and waited for the enemy who never came.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Purerock, The Submerged Layman

• Ruel E. Foster

Let us go then you and I and other furtive
submerging laymen
Through certain half deserted streets
The submerged retreats of muttering laymen
Who do not want to ask
The overwhelming "in" question—
Shall it be the Pill?
Capsule pill, jelly pill, abortifacient pill,
pill, pill—
Listen to the tintinnabulation of the pill
pill, pill,
Listen to the titillation of the matrons on
the pill, pill, pill—
Listen to the titillation of the babes on
the pill, pill, pill—.

In the room the emerging laymen come and go
Talking of John, *Commonweal*, and *Pio Nono*.

And indeed there will be time
For gaggles of exegetes of institutional ecumenicity
There will be time to finalize the dialogue
Time to be involved
Time for an encounter
Time for "Operation Preachback" (Hot-blooded
intellectuals tearing Padre's sermon from
limb to limbo)
Time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate—
The overwhelming question—
Shall it be the pill?—pill—pill?
Time for a hundred pills before the taking
of toast and tea
Time for a hundred before the vesper bells—
Before the vesper bells the vesper pills—
What a titillation their taking foretells
Vesper pills, vesper pills.

In the room the emerging laymen come and go
Talking of John, *Ramparts*, and *Pio Nono*.

And indeed there will be time for the emerging
 laymen to talk
Of Father Novak, militant young Jesuit
Turning in the pulpit—with a bald spot in the
 middle of his hair—
Hurling his rosary out into the startled congregation
 (Of emerging and submerging laymen)
Thundering magnificently—“*Ich kann nicht anders*”
 (They will say—“How active our priests are these
 days—how polyglot.”)
Father Novak, one of the new breed (They will say—
 “But how his neck and hair are thin”).
Rising, J. Alfred Purrock, a submerged layman,
 Hurls the rosary back in the best new liturgical
 manner,
“Operation hurl-back” trumpets the new breed—
“Getting the laymen involved—maybe rubber missals
 next and a real go at the clergy.”
For I have known them all already, known them all
All of the emerging laymen—Thorman, Novak, Cogley
Known them all—
I have measured out my life with snippets of
 Xavier Rynne—
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase
“Ghetto Catholic,” “Traditionalist,”
“Failure face in institutional ecumenicity”
How should I presume?

And I have known the dreadful English of the new mass
(Is it a Latin phrase of the old mass that makes
 me so digress?)
I have winced at the “yoo-hoo” prayer
Longed for the sonority of *in saecula saeculorum*
Yearned for a deeper hell for the English translator
 of the *Dies Irae*.
I have known it all.
So how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have sat in ecumenical conferences—
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 of confused emerging laymen
Locked in lonely dialogue with their frustrated,
 separated brethren.
Shall we ever see *anything* but their like again.
I should have been an Xavier Rynne
Scuttling God-like among the Lucelings
Disemboweling Cardinals, apotheosizing theologues.

No! I am not Xavier Rynne, not a Hans Kung, not a Schillebeeckx, not a Roberts, not a Baum
(Ban the Baum!)
Am an attendant (and submerged) layman.
One that will do to curdle a dialogue, bumble
an encounter or two
No doubt an easy tool—
But not to be trusted with high things—
As to *finalize* a dialogue
To compose a beatnik mass
To involve priests and nuns in picnics and barbecues—
Communal love feasts
Preach-ins, pray-ins, dialogue-ins.
To press cocktail crackers on embarrassed dinner
guests as sacred signs of the Eucharist,
To speak arcaneously of the Eucharist ("The Holy Thing")
To embrace sensuously in the kiss of peace (Therapeutic
affection, y' know)
To celebrate a hootenanny mass with guitars and bongo
drums—
To compel all to sign petitions—
"Cursillo's for All!"
To press the Holy Spirit to the therapist's couch
("What the church needs is a good psychoanalysis").
I grow old—I grow old
I shall buy a breviary and a copy of *The Psychopathology
of Everyday Life*
I shall walk upon the beach.

Shall I part my hair behind—*must* we discuss the pill?
I have heard the deacons singing each to each—
(The commandments, they say, are but the *beginning*
of dialogue)
I do not think they will sing to me—
or to other submerged laymen.

In the room the emerged laymen come and go
Talking of John, *America*, and *Pio Nino*.

We have dozed wearily in dialoguing rooms
Till emerging laymen's voices wake us
And we submerge.

Visit to East Texas In-Laws

• Robert Joe Stout

The Ticketagent

Her placid face jumped to half-finished expressions—
Smile, disapproval, public-servant goodcheer,
Then anger when she couldn't decide. The prisons
In which her feelings were kept seemed to split, fear
—Not of us but herself, her lacks—marched down her cheeks,
Weighting her lips as she tried to be kind. Then blinked,
Fighting herself, blaming us for the cracks
Her soul showed. *You'll have to wait!* Blindly, she winked
At the wall, shivered, snatched our receipts, and fled.

The Neighbor

Soft scrubbed hand, eyes behind thick lenses scratching mine
In search of a label—something to explain
My beard, my neat old-fashioned clothes. A sign
—Almost a plea—that I liked him, as though, by being
Different, I attacked his sense of wrong and right.
Beatnik, subversive, heretic. . . . “I used to teach
Your wife,” he mumbled, a quick shy smile in flight
About his lips. “Geometry and. . . .” Each
Silent moment spelled a condemnation kindness couldn’t reach.

The Farmer

Get off! get off! The face, suntoughened, tied
Together by a twisted mouth, bobbed frantically;
The rusted pickup swerved. *Goddammit, you've defied*
The law! “Nonsense, sir. . . .” *Yes! yes!* for cars! only
For cars! Pipe prancing on his lips, eyes leaping
Like wild demons in a dream, he danced around
The pram. “But there aren’t sidewalks,” I explained. A gaping
Frenzy locked his jaws. *The law! the law!* he screamed
Again, as though insouciance were both insult and wound.

Niggerboys

Thin as mosquitoes, quick, alive, hopping
On blacktop, they turned to cut through shantytown,
Past the shacks they had to call home. The funbopping
Stopped. As quiet as spiders, necks stiff, heads down,
Toes dragging, they let us pass. "Hi." Eyes
Like black glass peeked past blinking lids.
Hi-yi. . . . Not a word, just a breath, hand brushing flies
That weren't there from the face. Then, typical kids,
Nudging each other, hands at their makebelieve beards.

The Bookbuyer

Caught amid patterened reactions—brusk nod, face-rending
Praise, shrug and ignore—she watched us stomp in.
Her friend the bookseller shrugged. "The ending,
You said it was good?" *Good . . . ? oh yes! so much like Penn Warren!*
"Or Williams? I loved your report!" *Yes, I* her poise snapped,
Glance leaping the shelves to test mine. ". . . understand him so
well . . . !"
His vices, his. . . . She choked. Something seemed trapped
In her eyes, an insight or question; then, catching the swell
Of her breathing, a fear, as though seeing a minion of Hell.

The Old Neighbor

Plump, laughing with big-bosomed strength, loud voice
Rebounding through the house—clichés, exclamations,
Joys—*they're lovely kids!* then booming news about divorce,
Hey, Chris! I broke 200 twice!, extractions,
Fillings, menstrual pain, a '67 Dart
And yes-I-shouldn't-but-I-just-love-cake! *You write?*
"Yes," I said, surprised. *You're lucky! Lynne was twice as smart*
As any kid in school! Her smile hit mine with cowboy force, white
Teeth exclaiming willingness to fornicate or fight.

The Switchman

Tough—but not bold. Eyes buried in burned flesh.
The kind who shrivels inside when he's mad. *Here comes*
Santaclaus . . . he sang, safe on his side of iron mesh.
"Sheep!" I answered and his shoulders twitched. *Bums . . . !*
But his confidence failed. His skin seemed petrified,
His mind to cling to old, sure colors. *Why?*
Anger raped the question. *Lousy Reds!* He tried
To spit but it caught on his chin and he started to cry
—Not tears, capsules of hate, hard, yellowcolored, and dry.

The Doctor

Alcohol and Mennen perfume. Objective
Medical eyes. *Healthy kids*, he confessed
As though health were a sin, *you seem to live*
Well, take care of yourselves. . . . The rest
Left unsaid but implied: *people like you*
Should be nervous, diseased, your kids neurotic and wise. . . .
“Yes,” I said. Then, “goodbye.” Fingers flew
Over his scraped, polished chin. Then he blushed, knives
Of surgical duty castrating the praise in his eyes.

Another Princess

• David Conford

Finding herself locked in the tower,
Solitary, perplexed and without
The monstrous, sapphire-studded key,
She simply waits, knowing that magic
Can be malevolent for no reason
And cruel in only an incidental way
As a frog is cruel to dumb-buzzing gnats
Without any thought to their rights
As individuals or citizens,
Considering instead, if indeed
There is consideration, that his
Belly rumbles and his tongue is quick.
Perhaps that solitary princess
Still waits, a bit bemused, singing
In some sad mode that was never
Very popular and now seems strange
And distant as the cry of gulls
From the slowly rolling ponderous fog
At the foot of the castle of dreams.

At the Beginning

• Matt Field

there was of course the ocean
and that other which to the child stretched as far
and shifted also. Only the color was different.
By midsummer, the barrens
and the pastures dipping and rolling to the dunes
were browned and dusted by the sun.

Lifting down the bars and waiting
while the wagon stirred the wheelrut dust, and swayed
between the stone-proped fenceposts
gave time to rediscover it.

First, spikes of stubble stiffly
(against which the footstool curves in anticipation
as in recollection)
cropped, tidy with sheep-dung.

From the sanded soil
dusty clockwork monsters rocket from underfoot
in brittle armor
colored like parchment or their own tobacco.

Spread to the sun,
salted meshes of a cork-buoyed net
tangle yellowed
shadows in the drying grass.

Along the field
a splash of orange milkweed startles the air,
not to be picked, forbidden,
because by a logic
inexorable enough even for children
the orange butterfly chose it.

Not play, that folktale,
for things could vanish like the heath hen
from this place in the barren winter.
(Children still saw the last bird there
from time to time
although their parents knew
it was only a bob-white quail, and the heath hen
had died with her leaf-brown chick
in a hard winter
before the children were born.)

Where the cartrack vanishes
the farmhouse, weathered silver,
turns boarded windows to the distant sea.
In empty sunlight, the silence
laps the doorsill choked in bracken,
and only faintly a gull's crying
floats fathoms upward from the cove below.

To ripple the quiet,
to disturb the still air with preparation,
is not a profanation, but a ritual.
As long as a child can remember is always,
and the place exists
if it exists at all, in recollection, affirmed
by the return which finds it waiting
exactly as always.

There, the footpath plunges steeply
to the shore, through combers of slanting green
beach plum and scrub oak.
Down out of the air the sun is hot;
soft sand clogs the footstep.
Children dive
hurtling through tunnels of green grapevine, scenting
beyond the warmth of bayberry
the clear sea.

No doubt there is a reason
the sand cupped smoothly in this crescent
is as always so much whiter
than daily sand, but no geology
seems usefully to gloss its pure existence.

An upturned dory and three painted buoys
shape above tidewrack their precise dimensions.
Lower, the sand is swept
and fluted in ripples new as forever. Run

and print your presence on the fresh damp page
beside the lone cuneiform of gulls. Run
into the silver where the tide flows in.
To get there first, for children, is to win:

to win possession
by right of love and ceremony, where
to be possessed by is to so inherit
as to hold always. Now as at the beginning, run.
Drown into memory to be born.

Toby's Scarecrow, November

• Judy Dunn

None of us believed in ghosts
Or vanishings, or other tales,
But bravely whistled by him nightly
Barely seeing his lifeless height,
Inelegant details. Faceless
On his rotting stake he hung
Through more than autumn, staring down
In godless benediction. Crickets
Ticked within his stomach clogged
With musty straw (we saw them
In July when hiding treasures
In his dryness, making secret
Laws about his name). Toby's
Gingham shirt bleached pale
Held his lumpy form stretched
From nail to nail: jointless
Arms splinted, hands sewn
Inward, he hung feet
Upon the air. Crows clawed
His rag skull bare in
Momentary rest, as he
Surveyed his sterile kingdom, scaring
No one. Sometimes we guessed
How much he knows;
Toby says he hears,
But he's been taken down again,
Unhooked, folded in the barn
For another year.

Contributors

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Writers who appear in **four quarters** are eligible for awards up to \$1000 and republication in the Annual Literary Anthology scheduled to start in 1967, through the National Endowment for the Arts.

Editor, EDWARD P. SHEEKEY, F.S.C.

Associate Editors, JOHN J. KEENAN, F. PATRICK ELLIS, F.S.C.

Business Manager, CHARLES V. KELLY

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Typographic Cover Design by JOSEPH MINTZER

Manuscripts and other correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, **four quarters**, La Salle College, Philadelphia, Penna. 19141. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced and should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Annual Subscription: Two Dollars.
